



The Dictionary of Animal Languages

Heidi Sopinka

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A novel of love, longing, and art set in interwar Paris, *The Dictionary of Animal Languages* will appeal to readers of *All the Light We Cannot See* and *The Disappeared*.

Ivory Frame is a renowned artist. Now in her nineties, the famously reclusive painter remains devoted to her work. She has never married, never had a family, never had a child. So when a letter arrives disclosing that she has a granddaughter living in New York, her world is turned upside down and the past is brought painfully to life.

Disowned by her bourgeois family, the young Ivory had gone to interwar Paris to study art, and quickly found her true home among the avant-garde painters and poets who crowd the city's cafes. In fellow painter Tacita, she finds the sister she never had. In the Zoological Gardens, she finds a subject for her art capable of fascinating her endlessly. And in Lev, the brooding, haunted Russian 'migr' painter fleeing the Revolution and destined for greatness, she finds the love that will mark her life forever.

But she loses all this, and more, when the Second World War sweeps away the life she has only just discovered. In her grief, she turns to the project she had begun in Paris, and which will consume the rest of her life: a dictionary of animal languages. Part science, part art, the dictionary strives to transcribe the wordless yearning of animals, the lonely and love-laden cries that expect no response.

By nature solitary, Ivory withdraws fully into herself as she pursues her life's work. Until the discovery of one of Lev's paintings from 1940, inscribed to Ivory and now worth a fortune, brings to light a secret from her time in Paris that even Ivory could never guess. Now in her nineties, she is forced to acknowledge afresh all she has lost, and also to find meaning and beauty in a world defined by longing.

Masterfully written, and emotionally charged, *The Dictionary of Animal Languages* is about love and grief and art and the realization that, like tragedy, the best things in life arrive out of the blue.

The Dictionary of Animal Languages Details

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From Reader Review The Dictionary of Animal Languages for online ebook

Michelle says

4.5 stars

Review to come.

Collin says

At the beginning of this novel, the protagonist, Ivory Frame, is a frail old woman who has just received word that she has a grand-daughter. This baffles Frame, because she has no children. This enigmatic information leads into a wonderful novel. The novel is advertised and framed as a love story but I found it more of a telling of Frame's life. The narrative moves forward and back in time mid chapter, slowly filling in the tale of Ivory Frame. As a child, Frame is a solitary loner, constantly being expelled from school after school. Moving to Paris in the years between the great wars she finds company and what could be loosely described as friendship, with a group of artists and poets. This is where she meets Lev, a Russian artist, who she falls deeply in love with. After the conclusion of the Second World War, Ivory loses Lev and her passion for painting. Her passion and drive is now devoted to her study of the language of animals. This brings us back to the beginning of the novel where not only has she found out she has a grandchild but that the university is cutting her funding, effectively ending her dreams of completing "The Dictionary of Animal Languages". I know that Heidi Sopinka has worked as a travel writer and journalist but I must say that this novel is beautifully written and at times quite poetic, filled with sentences such as, "I remember feeling hardly more than a diagram of anatomy, skinless, strings of red and blue veins". Or the profound "nine thousand years of protecting ourselves from nature, now we must protect nature from ourselves". The structure of the narrative works very well, heightening the surprise at the ending. I enjoyed this novel very much.

Jerrie (redwritinghood) says

I listened on audiobook to this one, but I've ordered a print copy to read. Will write a review after.

Marjorie says

Ivory Frame has always been a rebellious one. She refuses to be subdued by the nuns at the boarding school her wealthy English parents have sent her to. She finds her way to Paris where she meets surrealists. She has a passionate love affair with a married Russian painter and becomes an artist herself. World War II is at its peak in Paris. When tragedy strikes, Ivory leaves Paris and tries to rebuild her life. She has always had an affinity with animals and sets out to record animal languages. Now aged 90, she is still working on her dictionary of animal languages when she's told that she has a grandchild, which stuns her since she has no children.

This book deeply touched me in a way that few books have ever done. It was a very slow read for me as I

wanted to savor each word. It's poetic, it's majestic and it's absolutely stunning. I love how each chapter is entitled a different animal Ivory has studied and the way the author incorporates that animal and its characteristics into the chapter. Each chapter is a work of art in and of itself. Some of the chapters are short essays on life and love that are just gorgeous.

The book is loosely based on the life of surrealist Leonora Carrington. The author spent several days with Ms. Carrington in her home in Mexico City and interviewed her for "The Believer". As soon as I finished the book, I had to read up on this artist. There were some similarities between Leonora Carrington and Ivory Frame but also some quite significant differences.

I'm saddened to see far too many negative reviews of this wonderful book. It's true that it wouldn't be for everyone and it isn't a light read. There isn't always a lot happening. But the author has a magnificent ability to get to the heart of her characters and brings Ivory's world vividly to life in the mind of her readers. I hope this book receives the recognition it deserves in the literary world.

This is a book that I will treasure and love and will read again. Most highly recommended.

This book was given to me by the publisher in return for an honest review.

David says

Reading this Tournament of Books finalist, I was frequently reminded of a quote from Chekhov: "In life, one does not...declare one's passion at every fencepost, and one does not pour out profound thoughts in a constant flow. No."

I wish Sopinka had considered this. Her first novel is - in the words of her protagonist - "Jejune. Thrumming with purpose. Full of ideas, unfocused but alive." It is definitely loaded with interesting concepts and poetic turns of phrase. Were it not also overburdened with florid prose and the endless parade of weighted moments, however, it could have been so much more powerful. I couldn't escape the notion that the author is more in love with the language she has applied than what is behind the language; which is grandly ironic, given the story's premise.

I struggled a lot with first person narrator Ivory Frame. We approach Ivory at the end of her long and disappointing life. She carries with her nine decades of frustration and hurt. Her mother didn't like her, her brothers didn't understand her, her teachers didn't support her, and her fellow scientists didn't embrace her. She was the mistress, not the wife. She was the sidekick, not the friend. She was the Anglaise, not the Parisienne. She was a Surrealist at a time when Realism was supreme. She was the intuitive naturalist, not the law-and-order biologist. And all that would be fine if the reader cared about her. Others have; I tried but could not.

Sopinka doesn't incorporate enough self-respect into the character of Ivory to make her sympathetic. Sentiments like "The only way I know how to express myself is to offer him my body" and "There is no need for me to alter anything now, he is worth the torment" made it hard to tolerate her, let alone form any kind of bond. I felt like I was being asked to care more for this semi-fictional woman than she cared for herself and was unable to embrace that proposition. So Ivory Frame remained more of an avatar to me than a person and there was not enough warmth to attract me to the supposed fire in her belly.

2.5 stars rounded up for obvious talent and passion.

Brooke says

DNF at 58%. I can't find any desire to continue reading this book. The story, while it has moments of beautiful writing, is slow moving and a bit confusing due to the lack of quotation marks around dialogue and the various points in time that it jumps between. I'm also frustrated because the part of the description that hooked me into reading this book has barely been mentioned. It has such a beautiful cover (and an intriguing description), but this book is officially my first DNF of 2018.

Sherri says

After sitting on this for a few days, I'm giving this 3 stars for a solid, enjoyable book that didn't quite work for me.

This book is nearly impossible to rate, so I'll skip the star rating for now. I listened to it, but am planning to re-read in print. The writing is exquisite and the story is fascinating. Even though I loved the narrator, the experimental style and sheer number of words used to tell the story made it a bit more difficult to take as an audiobook. I recommend it if you're following the Tournament of Books because it will be fun to discuss. It's definitely not a "book club" type of read.

Tommi says

(2.5) My hunch is that this would've been much more enjoyable if read physically, so do not be discouraged by my low rating at all if you're interested in the novel. I wasn't too keen on the audio narrator and I so wished I had the text with me in order to go back every now and then to keep track of all the levels of the story, so I ended up not always knowing who was talking and when and where. This is the kind of book I'm eager to hear other people talk about, for instance, during the Tournament of Books.

Margot says

3.5 stars. This book requires patience and generosity. Frequent time shifts make it hard to follow and the layering of minutiae and scenes of small, exacting detail felt like writing from the 19th century, or a time when people had longer attention spans. Still, the language dazzles and pierces in places, and I cared enough about Ivory's story - her art, her scientific research, her love affairs - to keep going, to unravel and then weave back together all of the strands of her life.

Penny (Literary Hoarders) says

Oh dear, oh dear. :-(This is NOT what I was expecting to both rate it or get from the reading experience. I

had high, high hopes that this one was going to be right up my alley and be a fantastic reading experience.

While there were some beautiful and lyrical moments in the writing, this was a rather strange, dreamlike read sometimes, often quite confusing, and overwhelmingly slow and painfully dry. I don't mind slow and quiet reads at all, but this one was just too deep into its own head that I couldn't crack it.

Ivory Frame is a renowned artist. Now in her nineties, the famously reclusive painter remains devoted to her work. She has never married, never had a family, never had a child. So when a letter arrives disclosing that she has a granddaughter living in New York, her world is turned upside down and the past is brought painfully to life.

But see, the problem with that is - there really isn't a great deal of discussion of this grandchild, or how it turns her world upside down? Or at least to me I didn't read that - there is really very, very little mention of this grandchild. Overall, just not what I was expecting and the bursts of beautiful writing couldn't carry me through to rate it any higher than what I have. How disappointing!!

I received a copy of The Dictionary of Animal Languages from Penguin Random House Canada. Many thanks as always!

Katie Long says

Solid three stars. There is nothing really special here, but I enjoyed spending time with these characters.

#TOB2019

Milky Mixer says

One review of this book called the writing "glass sharp." Unfortunately, I didn't find the writing to be "glass clear." I wanted to love this book so much more than I did. But I found it frustrating from the first couple of pages, on and on through its dreamlike incoherence and narrative shifts through different times, countries, memories, voices with no quotation marks, lists and broken sentences to shape mood, poetic prose, very poetic but almost too poetic..... Pause. Deep breath.

Every sentence does not need to be poetic. I just think the author maybe tried to do too much.

Also, the whole "mystery of the granddaughter she never had" that is billed on the book flap as the catalyst to the plot is not really a thread throughout the book. You keep waiting and waiting for something about this granddaughter... That being said, the last 50 pages of the book punched me in the gut. Knocked the air right out of me. Can a person ever truly put aside the pain of the past? How many lives do we leave behind us? When do we try to stop forgetting and start remembering, bittersweetly?

It IS lush and gorgeous writing, for sure. 3.5 stars.

Janet says

I can't believe how much difficulty I had finding a library print copy of this book. It became a personal challenge and I ended up requesting it be purchased. I read a combination of audio and print....I often switch back and forth if I have access to both. Narrator Elizabeth Proud was the perfect voice for a 92yo woman, Ivory Frame. She is a character you won't soon forget.

As Ivory approaches the end of her life, she is overwhelmed by the sense that so much of her life's work is left undone....work that became of outsized importance to her in rebuilding her personal identity after a consuming but ultimately tragic romantic relationship. I'm not sure how male readers will relate to this aspect of the novel as this subsumption of self to a partner seems to be more characteristic of women. Sopinka describes those feelings with breathtaking beauty and accuracy.

Just as an aside... I think Sopinka is a bit whimsical....not only is her protagonist called Ivory Frame but she dedicates the novel in part to a child named Winter Violet. I look forward to her next novel.

Daniel Sevitt says

A delight. I might never have come across this book had it not surfaced in the longlist for the Tournament of Books, but I couldn't be happier. Even as a first novel it arrives fully formed, gorgeously constructed and preternaturally poised. I have read books before which try to write about painting or music. Ivory Frame has dedicated her scientific career to understanding, capturing and preserving the most precious aspects of life in the same way that an artist or composer does. Her story is utterly heartbreakingly sad but she survives, she lives and she works on discovering and recording a truth beyond sadness. I really loved this book and it has my highest possible recommendation.

Jan says

Beautiful writing and an intriguing protagonist—a 92 year old who's a former artist and current wildlife biologist. The diffuse story-telling as she wanders through her memories left me wanting something more linear.
